

FOCUS

Vista Psychological & Counseling Centre, LLC

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Fostering Positive Friendships

Parents can help guide their kids toward healthier friendships. Here are ways to help:

- ◆ **Stay involved.** Talk with your children about their lives and activities. Knowing what goes on can help you better guide them toward positive, healthy experiences.
- ◆ **Keep an eye on social groups.** Though children may identify with a certain peer group for a period of time, they often move from group to group. Try to steer them toward peers who support them in healthy ways.
- ◆ **Encourage kids to do healthy activities when they're with friends.** For example, going for walk or bike ride, playing recreational sports, or volunteering.
- ◆ **Provide ways for kids to take healthy social risks.** For example, find opportunities for teens to get involved with their community and meet new people with different perspectives. Or to meet someone who can teach them about a topic of interest.
- ◆ **Share examples from your own life.** Explain how you've found ways to meet new people and what activities you enjoy doing with others. Model the behaviors you'd like to see.
- ◆ **Create a sense of belonging and acceptance.** Kids can learn about healthy relationships from their family experiences.

The Power of Peers

Who Influences Your Health?

Do birds of a feather really flock together? The science says yes. People do tend to choose friends who are similar to them. You also become more like our friends over time and that can influence your health. Many behaviors spread socially. Examples include how much you exercise, how much alcohol you drink, whether you smoke, and what foods you eat. Scientists are still trying to untangle why that is. Studies have found that activity in certain brain areas changes when other people are around. That can affect what you choose to do. But this work also suggests that you can harness the power of social relationships to gain healthier habits—and motivate others to do the same. **Social influence.** “People care about what others think across all different age groups—and that influences how much they value different ideas and behaviors,” says Dr. Emily Falk at the University of Pennsylvania. She studies how social networks affect decision making. This is called social, or peer influence. Teens are especially responsive to peer influence. That’s because their brains undergo changes that make them highly attuned to social situations. At the same time, the reward system in the teen brain becomes extra sensitive. The reward system is a brain circuit that causes feelings of pleasure. It’s activated by things we enjoy, like eating good food. It’s also activated by social rewards, like getting a compliment. And teens are just learning to navigate the social world. Understanding other people’s values and being influenced by them are important parts of socializing. Being influenced on things like clothing choices and musical taste can help teens learn how to find and make friends. But taking part in risky behaviors, like drinking alcohol or smoking, can lead to health or legal consequences. “Research shows that even just having another peer around can change the reward response in the brain and also the risk-taking tendencies of teenagers” says Falk. Her team studies how peers affect teens’ driving behaviors and smoking decisions. Some people seem to be more easily influenced than others, too. They may be more sensitive to feeling included or excluded by others. Or they may be more sensitive to social signals, like the tone of someone’s voice or their body language. Dr. Mary Heitzeg’s team of the University of Michigan is doing research to better understand how a person’s biology and reactions to social situations affect whether they develop substance use or mental health problems later in life. Using brain scans, the team is looking at how the brain’s reward system responds to different situations. Heitzeg’s team is part of a large 10 year effort, called the ABCD Study, to understand the factors that influence teens’ health and risk behavior in the long term. Factors can include families, friends,

(continued from cover) schools, neighborhoods, and communities. “Adolescence is such a risky period,” says Heitzeg. “That’s when sexual initiation happens, initiation and escalation of substance use happens, as well as other types of risk and delinquent behaviors, like risky driving.” But it’s also a time that peer influence can help teens thrive if it gets them more involved with their community or helps them learn behaviors to get along with others, like how to cooperate or be empathetic. **Peer Quality, Not Quantity.** Positive and negative peer influences can affect more than just your behavior. They can also change the way you feel. Studies show that, in general, the more friends you have and the more time you spend with them, the happier you are. Friends are those you people to share your feelings with, to get new perspectives from, or to just do fun activities with. But it’s the quality of those friendships—not quantity—that really makes the difference. Quality of friendships has been linked to higher life satisfaction and better mental health. “We’ve all experienced letting a friendship go because it didn’t feel great,” says Dr. Rebecca Schwartz-Mette of the University of Maine. Her lab studies how peer relationships affect the emotional development of children and teens. Friendships you feel you want to let go of may be low quality. They might be fraught with conflict, criticism, and aggression. For youth low quality friendships are linked to poor academic performance and behavioral issues. High quality friendships provide understanding, support, and validation of your self-worth. These types of friendships are more stable and are more satisfying. Spending time with friends can be especially helpful for people with anxiety or depression. However, Schwartz-Mette’s studies have shown that depression can also be worsened by certain friendship qualities. One is called co-rumination. “Co-rumination is basically when people get together and talk excessively about everything that’s going wrong and how bad they feel,” she explains. “With that person, they feel understood, validated, and that this person is emotionally close to them. But they get more depressed because they’re focusing their attention on negative things.” Research suggest that it may help to refocus such friendships. Talk about both positive and negative things in your day. Look for healthy activities to get out and do together, like going for a walk. Encourage each other to keep up healthy habits like physical activity, healthy eating, and getting a good nights’s sleep. “Noticing that our behavior is influenced by other people, we can be intentional and try to focus on the people who are doing the things we want to get into

ourselves.,” Falk explains. Sharing your health habits with other people could make a real difference to somebody else.” And to yourself.

Source: National Institute of Health (NIH), Department of Health and Human Services, [newsinahealth.nih.gov](https://www.newsinahealth.nih.gov), September 2021.

Fun Ways to Read With Your Child

Experts in child literacy are unanimous in their belief that parents should read with their children. The power of the parent-child bond has a positive effect on a child’s attitude toward reading and his ability to read. Try the suggestions below to help make reading with your child both a pleasure and a learning experience.

- ◆ **Choose the right book using the “five-finger rule.”** Have your child open the book to any page into the middle of the book and read that page. Each time she comes across a word she does not know, she should hold up a finger . If she gets to five fingers before she finishes reading the page, the book is too hard. If she doesn’t hold up any fingers, the book is probably easy for your child and can be used to build reading fluency. If she holds up two or three fingers the book is likely to be a good level for her ready to grow.
- ◆ **Use sound strategies to tackle a new word.** Ask your child to sound out an unknown word. Look at the letters in a difficult word and have your child pronounce each sound or phoneme. Then see if he can blend the sounds together to pronounce the word. Help him memorize irregular words. Explain that words like *where*, *hour*, and *sign* are hard to sound out since they don’t follow normal sound patterns. Point these words out when you’re reading to help your child learn to recognize them on his own. Use suffixes, prefixes, and root words. If your child knows the word *day*, guide him to define new words like *yesterday* or *daily*. Similarly, if he knows what *pre-* means, it’s easy to learn preschool.
- ◆ **Use the story to help your child learn.** Ask your child what word or idea would make sense in the plot of the story or when she gets stuck on an unfamiliar word. Encourage your child to look at illustrations pictures, titles, or graphs to figure out the meaning of new words.
- ◆ **Give support and encouragement.** Challenge your child to figure out new words, but always supply the word before he becomes frustrated. After your child has read a story, reread it aloud yourself so that he can enjoy it without interruption.

- ◆ **Be a good role model.** Let your child see you reading, and share your excitement when you enjoy a great book of your own.
- ◆ **Make reading a priority.** Whether it's 10 minutes every night before bed or an hour every Sunday morning to help to set aside a specific time for reading. This kind of special "together time" can go a long way toward getting your child interested in books.
- ◆ **Create the right atmosphere.** Find a quiet comfortable place to listen to your child read. While you don't need to build a special reading nook, it helps to ensure that, even in a busy home, there's a quiet place for reading.
- ◆ **Make reading fun.** Kids may not get excited about the idea of quiet time spent curled up on the couch. Why not make it fun by turning reading sessions into impromptu theater performances? Play around with funny voices to impersonate animals or unusual characters in stories. You'll get to release some tension, and your child will learn to think of reading as fun rather than work.
- ◆ **Keep reading aloud to your child.** Don't stop reading aloud to your child once she learns to read by herself. When you read to her, you let your child enjoy books that are beyond her independent reading level and build her vocabulary by exposing her to new words. Reading aloud is also a chance for you to model reading smoothly and with expression.
- ◆ **Introduce new books.** Each year there is one book that seems to steal the hearts and minds of all children. While it may seem like the only book your child wants to read, it's important to remember that there are millions of books that will suit your child's interests and capture his imagination. Use these resources to help your child find great books:

Scholastic Books Parent Resources,
scholastic.com/parents/index.htm

Random House Children's Books,
randomhouse.com/kids/

The Children's Literature Web Guide,
acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/

Source: Great Schools Staff,
***GreatSchools.org*, August 12, 2012.**

Nine Steps to Forgiveness

We all suffer slights hurts, and betrayals, and it's natural to be upset with the people who hurt us, or sometimes even cut off contact with them. But holding onto a grudge too deeply or for too long can wreak havoc on our mental and physical health—it can elevate stress, increase our blood pressure and heart rate and even compromise our immune system. Forgiveness entails letting go of resentment or vengeance toward an offender and making peace with what happened so you can move on with your life; it doesn't necessarily mean reconciling with that person. Because forgiveness can be a daunting challenge, Dr. Fred Luskin of Stanford University has designed these nine steps to walk people through the process of forgiving someone who hurt them. The process of forgiveness takes time and should only be initiated when you feel ready and have had time to grieve the wrong that was done to you. Research suggests that practicing forgiveness can not only strengthen relationships but also reduce toxic feelings of stress and anger and boost happiness and optimism. Each person will forgive at their own pace. It is suggested that you move through the steps below based on what works for you.

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then tell a few trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning their actions. In forgiveness you seek the peace and understanding that comes from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognized that your primary distress is coming from hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago.
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body's fight or flight response. This could mean taking deep breaths, doing a mindful breathing exercise, taking a walk outside—whatever is most effective for you.

6. Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love friendships, and prosperity, and work hard to get them. However, these are “unenforceable rules”: You will suffer when buy demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.

7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.

8. Remember that a life well-lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have rather than attending to what you do not have.

9. Amend the way you look at your past so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive.

In a 2006 study published in the Journal of Clinical Psychology, 259 adults who completed a six-week forgiveness training (90 minutes/ sessions) reported lower stress, anger, and hurt than people who didn't undergo the training. They also felt more capable of forgiving and greater optimism immediately after the training and four months later. Dr. Luskin led the training, which involved teaching participants the core elements of forgiveness outlined above, including taking less personal offense, blaming the offender less and offering more understanding of the offender and of oneself. Dr. Luskin has also successfully led forgiveness training for victims of violence in Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone. By reducing feelings of anger and resentment that are not serving a constructive purpose, the steps described above can help shift people's mental attention away from ruminating on negative event in their past; this can decrease stress levels and potentially even improve physical health. In addition, these steps encourage people to focus on and appreciate the positives in their lives such as experiences of receiving kindness and love—an orientation to life that, research suggests, can increase happiness and improve relationships.

Source: Fred Luskin, Ph.D., Stanford Forgiveness Projects, Stanford University, and *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription*

The Common Buckeye Butterfly Mindfulness Guided Meditation

Do this for you. Take two minutes out of your day to slow down your breathing, de-stress, release any anxiety/ tension, and give your mind a mental break. Being in nature and/or looking at nature photography can provide countless benefits. Research shows that spending time in nature, or even just looking at it through photography can reduce stress, depression and anxiety, slow down breathing, lower heart rate and much, more. So without further ado, let's start to unwind.

Wherever you are, take a few seconds to get as comfortable as possible, and focus on your breathing.

Inhale for 4 seconds.

Hold our breath for 4 seconds.

Release your breath for 4 seconds.

Repeat this 2-3 times. Close our eyes for a moment, if that feels right for you.

Imagine yourself sitting in your favorite sunny spot.

You welcome the feeling of the sun and warm, gentle breeze on your skin when you notice a bright, red flower nearby.

You move closer to the flower to admire its beauty. Suddenly, a butterfly lands right on the flower.

You silently watch as the butterfly drinks the flower's nectar.

You feel the supportive ground beneath you.

As you continue to sit, what else do you see?

Sit and contemplate this scene and focus on your inhale, hold and exhale for as long as you are able. As you go throughout your day (or if you find yourself up at night), come back to this picture, the scene you created in your mind and your breathe.

Source: themindfulmomblographer.com



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